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ABSTRACT

Composition classrooms are the place to talk specifically about the rhetoricity of writing in academic disciplines. Students can use personal experiences to understand what it means to see themselves as aggressive or passive participants of various institutions. Too often students do not understand themselves as having any authority, but are instead satisfied with just doing what they are told. They seem to overemphasize the authority of the "experts," as a result of which, too many papers possess a certain unoriginality which takes the form of anything from an uninvolved and indecisive reproduction of an argument to plagiarism. Assignments can be designed to avoid this problem by engaging students in exploring their participation in this institution as one of many others in their lives. In order to get at the institutionalization of language, the assignments should focus on the words of texts, and how the words are used by writers to do things to readers within a specific context. This focus shows the students that the specific language is a tool for creating ideas and effect, thus enabling them to grasp the rhetorical nature of authority. Four assignments which have proved effective in the classroom require students to: (1) examine the multiplicity of voices within themselves; (2) explore and analyze the voices used in another text; (3) write about how they themselves, in the prior assignment, used various voices both favorably and unfavorably to create authority; and (4) discuss how an author has created knowledge by building on the work of others. (Full instructions for the assignments are attached.) (PRA)

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The Writing Process and the Distribution of Power

The reasons for choosing to teach composition as something more than a matter of helping students produce academic prose, to teach it from the perspective of encouraging students to write about that prose seems to me an appropriate application of rhetoric. The kinds of methodologies that we as people trained in rhetoric and composition can bring to our students' writing are specific to a discipline and aren't the same methodologies which instructors in other departments like history or biology bring to student writing. Therefore, I think our composition classrooms are the place to talk more specifically about the rhetoricity of writing in academic disciplines.

I use the term "discipline" deliberately to capture the notion that all language is disciplined and disciplining; that the varieties of language use done by and on our students inside and outside of the classroom are largely institutionalized. One student wrote in his journal that he learned the "authority of aggressiveness" from the "president of a gang" he used to belong to. By becoming disciplined in the gang he had acquired a kind of authority he said he applied to his college career. At the same time, another student wrote that the discipline of his family

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"always telling me what to do...not to go out...took authority away from us...made my sister shy...in my culture I can break away, but I feel sorry for my sister, she can't".

It is by no means original to recognize that students bring these kinds of experiences and attitudes to school, and it is not even original to take them into account in our teaching. But I do want to suggest that students can use these experiences to understand what it means to see themselves as aggressive or passive participants of various institutions. Thus I think it important for students to participate in exploring their creation of themselves through their recreation of the language of institutions. In this course of study, the discipline of composition may be able to use writing from any field, but what we say and what we ask our students to say about that writing should address the ways in which it creates passive or aggressive roles for everyone. I think it worthwhile for the students to engage the topic of the kinds of things which are done to them, through them, and by them with words and with writing; and the language of the university as an institution, along with the students' engagement or lack of engagement with it, are issues which can be used to teach this topic.

My experience has too often been that students do not, at least at the freshman level, understand themselves as having any authority, as being engaged, in their writing, they are satisfied with passivity, with just doing what

they're told. They also seem to overemphasize the authority of the "experts" whom they write about. Somehow authority is this thing which other people have and they don't, leaving them in the position of having to somehow write by drawing exclusively on the authority of others. Their roles have simply always been to see these experts as insiders while seeing themselves as outsiders. As a result, too many papers possess a certain unoriginality which takes the form of anything from an uninvolved and indecisive reproduction of an argument to plagiarism. I think that the assignments I have used avoid this problem by engaging students in exploring their participation in this institution as one of many others in their lives. I engage them where they recreate, through that participation, the authority of this institution.

Briefly, the basic premise of everything we read and write is that people use words to do things to themselves and to others and that their, the students', use of writing in the university participates in that same activity; that is, they use words to do things to themselves and to me. The composition classroom becomes then a place within which reading and writing are inextricably linked in a discussion of how people participate through language in the institution of the university and then how the discourse of that institution relates to others.

In order to get at the institutionalization of language, I felt it necessary to focus my assignments on the words of

texts and how those words are used by writers to do things to readers within a specific context. This focus on the language of texts also maintains for students the notion that the specific language is a tool for creating ideas and effects, opposing this to the seemingly commonsensical notion that the "truth" is eternal and immutable. I think that enabling students to grasp the rhetorical nature of authority as something visible in the words and texts of an institution is an important step in demystifying their notions of the monolithic one-sidedness of an "expert" as sole-possessor of "The Truth". I hope that it is also a step towards their conscious manipulation of authority in their writing.

The first assignment begins with a discussion of the multiplicity of voices within the students themselves. We talk about how the voices of a variety of institutions: friends, family, work, mass media, ethnic background, and classrooms, shape what they say, how they use these voices, and how they are used by them either advantageously or disadvantageously in various situations. They write about and discuss how these voices conflict or reinforce each other. The two journals I quoted above are part of this writing. Frustration and confusion are not uncommon. One student, who had internalized elsewhere that success in school required someone else's language, wrote that he gets in fights with his family because they perceive him as using words to "try to put them down". Another student said she

constantly has to resist the voices of teachers who told her to "never use I". She wrote, "I think they make it hard for me...I have to go against some of the voices to write in college".

The students explore this tangle of institutions outside of themselves as well. By reading any article of interest to them, they can analyze the voices in other texts: several have read articles about Lithuania and Gorbachev, racial stereotypes, and even folk medicine. I instruct them to look not only for the use of quotes, but also for the use of passives and the personal pronoun "I", or for "we"; they then use these words to see how the author negotiates authority for herself or her ideas through objectification, intimidation, or identification. The students also look at how the author of the article internalizes others voices, situates quotations, and orients herself to various institutions. A brief example of this is from a student who wrote about the TIME article "A Parent's View of Pop Sex and Violence". The student reads the author of the article as establishing his authority as "the type of parent that is ideal in our society. He is protective of his children and their exposure to certain types of entertainment...". Quoting this author as saying he can't protect his children forever, that they will "early sample the forbidden fruit" of certain entertainments, the student argued that "this quote expresses his obligation to his sons to adopt his values", she goes through an involved discussion of this and

concludes that "The voices in him include: his wife (who is presumed to share his beliefs), young people unfortunate to have parents like himself, his sons, the authority figures by which he was influenced, his own experiences, and the entertainment industry [against which he is responding]". Students hopefully come away from this series of activities having discovered that even for the "experts", authority is a rhetorical struggle primary to every act of writing.

This may seem to play right back into the students' belief that they have no authority of their own, and in a way it does. Even while I have seen students write papers which do not demonstrate any presence of an individual voice, I have seen them vehemently defend their own individuality. The point of seeing the interrelationships among voices however is to move beyond this paradox, to see that an individual's voice is a matter of negotiating a field of voices in a way which brings authority into a certain text in certain ways for certain reasons: I hope that the result is to bring authority to the student author of the paper as opposed to the teacher assigning it or the "expert" who is quoted in it.

Consequently, after having completed the above assignment about how another piece of writing uses various voices both favorably and unfavorably, the students write about how they did these things, how they used the various voices in their articles both favorably and unfavorably to create in their own writing a "truth" about their articles.

In other words, they explore how references and quotes from their articles, how the voices in that article, as well as how all the references to themselves, create a position in their writing. Even though one student wrote that she was "claiming authority" by not exclusively quoting from others, by "learning to write...using the first person", most students initially state that they have written simply for the grade--thereby shifting the authority for their papers to me, the teacher. They further claim that their positions are merely objective restatements of what was already in their articles--that they are really not saying anything--thereby placing the remainder of the authority for their writing on the "experts" whom they have quoted. But as we explore the meaning of putting these voices into their own writing , the students begin to get a sense for what negotiating voices is, for how their own writing participates in a dynamic between self and other which creates the presence in writing known as "author".

The further exploration of this dynamic takes the form of another assignment about how the author of another piece of writing uses still other writing in creating a position . Beginning with any article that has citations, the students choose one or two seemingly significant sources. They then go to those articles and find one or two other seemingly significant sources and get those. The purpose behind this is to establish a field of voices responsive to each other within the constraints of a discipline. With this I hope the

students see that quoting "experts" and writing within the constraints of a discipline doesn't mean a surrender of voice.

But this assignment also raises the issue of what authority they can have to address that discipline from the outside. As one student said about an issue debated in her psychology articles, "we can't say anything because we aren't scientists". Yet the issues "scientists" debate in the students' articles: AIDS and sexual stereotypes, racism on college campuses, and the war on drugs, touch their lives everyday. This tension, that there is an "exclusive discussion" about issues which impact on people other than those experts who discuss it, is precisely what the students explore. By looking to the relationship among their articles they ask just how that discipline creates a topic, its authority to speak on that topic, and the broader consequences of that activity. The students may not be able to participate directly in that discipline, but their writing about any discipline's writing can make them less likely passive victims of the authority created through those discourses.

A student writing about campus racism explored the relationship between articles discussing racial attitudes with an article evaluating the effects of those attitudes on black student enrollment. The question for this student was, "How do they explain the drop in enrollment?" He wrote that one of the articles describes a "New Racism", which is

defined in terms of the "Old Racism", and which "has taken on less extremes of the past, when black students were fighting to enter predominantly white institutions". By exploring the dynamic between these notions of old and new, the student saw how this definition of racism become a key for explaining "how racial incidences cause a decrease in the black enrollment to predominantly white institutions". He was thus able to see that a certain discourse about a topic, campus racism and its effects, develops not just in response to "the facts", but also in response to a discipline.

In conclusion, students as writers are writing in a classroom, within a discipline, about how disciplines structure writing. Moving back and forth between these realms, students address what writing, including their own, does to them as well as through them. I think they also begin to see the complexities of participation in a world of widely divergent, yet constantly interacting, discourses.

ASSIGNMENTS

The Many Voices in an Author

What different voices influence the way you write? Parents? Teachers? Friends? Maybe even musicians and Actors? How does your language use change from one context to another? From writing for family to writing for friends? What words or phrases do you use that you first heard from your parents? At a friends? In a movie?

Authorship: Authority and Responsibility

For this assignment you are to take any article in which the author quotes from other sources. In your paper, quote several passages. Then argue, using those passages as examples, how you think the author has created authority for her writing. Has she taken full responsibility for what she says? Has she put the responsibility onto someone else? Or is it something in between? Look at how many different voices there are in each passage. If she quotes from Smith, then there are at least two. Also, discuss the reasons you think the author took authority/responsibility in this way. Why was it necessary? How does this manner of writing give validity to the author's ideas?

Reflections on Your Own Authorship

In your papers you referred to and quoted the voices in another piece of writing. Reflect on this exercise by writing about the voices in your own paper. Have you taken full responsibility for what you say? Did you place the responsibility on someone else through a quote? Or did the quote, using someone else's voice, give you authority and responsibility? Why was it necessary to be responsible in this way? How does this manner of writing give validity to your ideas?

The Creation of Knowledge

Using the tools and skills you have developed through your previous assignments, write an essay in which you discuss how an author has created knowledge by building on the work of others before her within her discipline. Go back not only to the articles your author depends on, go back also to the articles which those writers depend on. With this material in hand, discuss these authors as debating an issue. What positions do they take in relation to each other? Which ideas stay the same? Which ones change? What can you conclude about this interaction?